

# Redditors Revealed: Motivational Factors of the Reddit Community

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## Abstract

*The purpose of this paper is to examine what motivational factors influence frequency of participation on the social news website Reddit.com, which has evolved from a news aggregator into a thriving virtual community. This study takes the uses and gratifications approach to examine why people participate in this community. A survey was posted to Reddit.com and was completed by 549 users. Multiple Regression analysis was conducted to assess factors (informativeness, socializing/ community building, status-seeking, entertainment) that influence participation. Findings indicate that uses and gratifications is a valid means by which to examine the motivations and gratification for users of new media, specifically online social media platforms. Findings for motivational factors were consistent with the current literature, with the exception of information seeking as a gratification sought / obtained. Results may be useful for designers of online communities and for scholars to further explore new types of needs and gratifications for those who participate in virtual communities.*

## 1. Introduction

Recent events such as the Occupy Wall Street and SOPA protest movements have illustrated that a fundamental shift in the way people share news content, as well as why and how they share may be taking place [1, 2]. Reddit.com is currently the second highest ranked news website, the 50<sup>th</sup> most visited site on the Internet, and the 18<sup>th</sup> most visited in the United States [3]. According to the Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project, Reddit is currently used by only about 6% of the U.S. population, compared to Facebook at 67% [4]. However, Reddit is consistently touted in the popular media, such as *Time* Magazine and *New York Magazine*, as one of the more influential sites on the Internet [5, 6].

Reddit is categorized as a social news site by Alexa [3] and is the second most trafficked news-related site,

ranking above CNN and Fox News. It is the highest ranked news aggregator site by a wide margin, according to Alexa's rankings [3].

Reddit users, known as Redditors, have played and are playing a vital role in this new way people interact online. Web 2.0 platforms and sites like Reddit are also changing how news content is disseminated and shared as the relationship between people and media is evolving.

Websites created purely for sharing news and other media content, known as news aggregators, are not new to the Internet. Reddit.com is one such site which has been in existence since 2005 [7]. However, Reddit is more than a place to post news content; it has evolved into a massive, thriving, highly influential virtual community [5, 6]. With its ever-growing cadre of Subreddits, specialized areas focusing on a wide variety of topics, Reddit is more like a meta-community. In a meta-community discrete communities—individual and grouped Subreddits—are linked by the diffusion of interacting species—individual users and groups of users who subscribe to many Subreddits and interact across them. Reddit has been referred to as both *a* culture and *many* cultures because of the complex interactions across Subreddits [8]. Users, employing sometimes one, sometimes many Reddit usernames, move seamlessly from Subreddit to Subreddit and spread content across Subreddits on the site, which are interwoven to create Reddit as a recognizable entity outside of the Reddit user community as a whole.

The proliferation of virtual communities that has accompanied the exponential growth of the Web 2.0 and mobile technologies has attracted the interest of scholars over the last two decades. As these virtual communities have grown and expanded, the opportunities for members to share all types of content, including news content, have also expanded.

With the rise of participatory culture and the advent of the virtual community, agency has become more than the motivation to seek out media that meet specific user-determined criteria. As new media technologies have expanded, scholars have proposed new approaches to examining the phenomena. Uses and gratifications, for example, which was

traditionally used to examine user choices in consumption of mass media has been revitalized to study new media [9, 10]. New technologies of the Internet afford users the opportunity to meet a wider variety of needs in new ways that simply were not possible within the confines of traditional media channels [9, 10, 11].

The introduction of Web 2.0 allowed for an unprecedented level of participation, collaboration, asynchronous communication and construction of new social connections [9]. Indeed, the line between media producer and media user has not only blurred, but in the case of some sites like Reddit, the line has been completely obliterated. This research will examine the highly participatory nature of Reddit through the lens of the uses and gratifications approach. Research applying the uses and gratifications approach to a news aggregator website may provide useful data for scholars studying new media and the ways in which traditional media theories can be applied in these new contexts. It may also provide guidance to designers looking to improve the user experience or build and retain an active member base in this type of virtual community.

## **2. Background**

### **2.1 Uses and Gratifications**

In the sociopsychological tradition of communication theories, the uses and gratifications approach, which originated in studies of radio and comics in the 1940s [12], has been employed extensively to study media consumption. From a uses and gratifications perspective, the audience or user is not a passive receiver of the media message but is seen as having considerable agency in that individuals are aware of their own needs and are proactive in seeking out media that meet those needs [9, 12, 13].

Though some have defined it as theory [14], uses and gratifications is not a single communication theory, but rather a perspective from which to examine how and why people use media to meet a variety of needs, especially in the context of communities and social interaction. However, early studies did not specify the types of needs users were trying to meet by seeking out and choosing certain media [9, 11, 13, 15]. Therefore, later scholars offered more specified typologies.

Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch [12] presented more formalized typologies for audience gratifications and addressed some of the assumptions of this theoretical approach. Rubin [13] outlined what has become the traditional five clusters of needs, including cognitive

(seeking information and understanding), affective (such as emotional or aesthetic interactions), social integrative (seeking status or belonging), personal integrative (need for confidence and high self-esteem) and diversion (entertainment). These two re-workings of uses and gratifications, among others, proposed breathing new life into the approach by refining it into a bona fide method for studying audiences and mass media consumption.

Earlier studies focused solely on media consumption like watching television, listening to the radio, or reading comic books [12] but, with the dawn of the digital age, scholars began to reexamine the uses and gratifications approach in the light of new media technologies [9, 10]. How would these new opportunities for users alter their motivations and gratifications sought in using these emerging technologies?

Uses and gratifications has proven to be especially resilient and useful in studying why and how people engage with emerging media technologies through the years [9, 10, 11, 12] because it may be adapted to new and different needs and media channels and addresses potential gratifications derived from use of emerging technologies.

Ruggiero [9] postulated ways to utilize uses and gratifications in the new millennium. He proposed that the traditional needs clusters were still valid, but the new media offered even more options. For example, he noted that as new technologies have emerged, time and again uses and gratifications has proved a useful theoretical approach to studying how and why people interact with these new technologies, from broadcast television to Web 2.0 technologies.

One of the promising lines of inquiry outlined by Ruggiero was how the interactivity, demassification and asynchronicity of the Internet could be especially impactful when it came to gratifications sought by those interested in news. Interactivity affords users the opportunity to interact with the media and each other; demassification results in users participating and customizing their media in ways not possible with traditional mass media; and asynchronicity affords users the opportunity to interact and retrieve content over time, such as reading content, posting, and returning at a later time to read what others have posted.

With the advent of Web 2.0 [16], scholars have begun to view the uses and gratifications approach as a valuable tool that has emerged over time to accommodate new media and new technologies, and thus, a useful means to studying why and how people use these emergent technologies [9, 10, 11, 14].

## 2.2 Online Communities and Participatory Culture

Online communities share many commonalities with traditional face-to-face communities. Virtual communities, according to Rheingold [17], are “social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace” [17]. An online community is where people form relationships by interacting in a virtual space. This communication allows people to share and build culture through interaction. Jenkins [18] detailed the rise of participatory culture through the Internet. The passive audience gives way to the user, who creates, shapes, reshapes and spreads media content across space and time.

People not only choose media that meet their needs according to traditional uses and gratifications concepts, they now create, share, exchange and shape the media they choose [18]. Jenkins, Ford and Green discussed patterns of co-creation and what constitutes meaningful participation. The current media environment has become increasingly conducive to the spread of media content. Practically, “spreadability is the result of shifts in the nature of technologies which make it easier to produce, upload, download, appropriate, remix, recirculate and embed content” [19]. This concept of spreadable media in a participatory culture informs the discussion of Reddit by illustrating the array of actions and activities in which Redditors engage when interacting on Reddit, including posting content, commenting and voting on content and comments posted by others. These technology shifts have enabled thriving virtual communities, like Reddit, to develop and expand. However, little research has been published on specifically why Reddit users engage in these participatory activities, and spread media within and across Subreddit communities as well as across the Internet on other social media and websites. Therefore, it is important to examine Redditors’ motivational factors in order to better understand the current state of participatory culture as it relates to participation on a site designed to facilitate content sharing.

## 2.3 Motivations for Participation

Why and how people share news across social networks and in virtual communities has also been the subject of recent research [14, 20, 21, 22, 23]. These studies have identified various motivational factors that may predict participation and sharing behaviors in virtual communities. For example, socializing, entertainment, self-status seeking, and information

were found to be a motivational factor for Facebook group members [22], while entertainment, maintaining relationships and information were strong indicators of sharing content on Twitter [23]. Motivations for YouTube users included expressing opinions and making their voice heard among their peers, in addition to entertainment and information-seeking [21]. Information seeking, socializing and status-seeking have been found to be strong predictors of sharing news on social media platforms [14]. Though individuals participate for a variety of reasons, taken together, findings of recent studies in this area indicate that users are motivated by informativeness or information-seeking, socializing and community building, status-seeking and entertainment.

**2.3.1 Informativeness.** Informativeness or information seeking—the desire for knowledge—is one of Rubin’s five basic needs clusters [13]. Informativeness has been positively associated with Internet and social media participation in previous studies [14, 20]. Indeed, information seeking has been deemed “the most salient use of the Internet [15].” Seeking and obtaining credible, useful information is one of the primary motivations for Internet usage [24]. For college students’ use of Facebook groups, information seeking was most strongly associated with civic engagement and political activities. It is also associated with wanting to keep up to date and find out about upcoming events and activities [22]. Reddit has been and continues to be a site where users organize civic engagement [1].

Studies of other social media sites with similarities to Reddit, such as Twitter, YouTube and Wikipedia, all found that information seeking and sharing were among the strongest gratifications sought and obtained from users of these sites [21, 22, 23]. Therefore, this paper puts forth the following hypothesis:

H1: Informativeness is a positive predictor of participation on Reddit.com.

**2.3.2 Socializing/Community building.** Social integration or belonging is among Rubin’s basic clusters of needs addressed by media consumption [13]. Past studies have found socialization and community seeking as strong motivations among users [10, 20, 21, 22, 23]. Building new social contacts [22; 25] and maintaining current social contacts [26] are among the most prevalent reasons for participation on social media platforms. A taxonomy of social media sites, including bookmarking or news aggregator sites such as Reddit, characterized aggregators as virtual communities where sharing content facilitates social connections [27].

Studies of social media sites, such as Facebook, as well as social knowledge-building communities, such as Wikipedia, found socializing and community as strong motivations and gratifications sought by users of those sites [10, 22]. Reddit affords users the opportunity to interact with other users by posting, commenting and voting. Therefore, this paper puts forth the following hypothesis:

H2: Socializing/ community building is a positive predictor of participation on Reddit.com.

**2.3.3 Status-seeking.** Status-seeking refers to improving one's social status, and is derived from Rubin's social integrative needs [13]. Status-seeking has been shown to be a strong motivating factor from a uses and gratifications perspective in studies of news sharing, Internet and social media usage [10, 14, 21, 28].

An examination of news sharing within a traditional media context found that social status was a motivating factor [28]. When it comes to sharing news on YouTube, researchers found that expressing opinions and having a voice were strong motivating factors which directly inform status-seeking among one's peers [21]. Status-seeking has been found as a strong indicator of news sharing behaviors in social media platforms, since through sharing useful timely information, users may gain status among other site users [14]. Reddit offers a built-in means for users to gain status through its Karma points system. Therefore, this paper puts forth the following hypothesis:

H3: Status-seeking is a positive predictor of participation on Reddit.com.

**2.3.4 Entertainment.** Entertainment as a motivating factor is defined by Rubin as the need for pleasure, emotional and aesthetic experiences [13]. Entertainment seeking has been found to be a strong motivation factor in Internet and social media usage [21, 22, 23, 29]. Studies have indicated that reading online news is positively associated with entertainment [29], and that sharing content, may also meet entertainment needs for users [29]. For YouTube and Twitters users, certain types of news content, especially that which is entertainment-related is also a motivating factor in meeting entertainment needs [21, 23]. Analysis of Reddit content has revealed that entertainment-related items can be among the top-rated postings, garnering the highest level of user reaction on a given day [30]. Therefore, this paper puts forth the following hypothesis:

H4: Entertainment is a positive predictor of participation on Reddit.com.

## 3. Methods

After a review of the published literature employing the uses and gratifications approach to a variety of online communities similar to Reddit, four potential motivational factors for Reddit users emerged. The purpose of this paper is to examine these factors—*informativeness/information-seeking, socializing/ community building, status-seeking and entertainment*—which may influence frequency of participation on the news aggregator social site Reddit.com. This study employed a survey designed to assess the motivational factors related to how often people visit Reddit, the activities they engage in while on the site and how often they perform or participate in these activities.

### 3.1. Participants

The survey was posted to Reddit.com in order to collect responses from actual Reddit users. Both registered users and guests who visited the Subreddit titled "r/samplesize" during the time the survey was active were able to access the survey. Of the 700 responses collected, 549 participants completed the entire survey. After preliminary analyses and data preparation to remove outliers, 536 individuals who participated in the study were included in the analysis—330 were male; 206 were female. More than 85% of respondents were between the ages of 18 and 29, and 83% were white. More than half (59.3%) were enrolled students, while 45.7% had already obtained a college degree. Registered members of Reddit.com (97.9%) were the largest group of respondents. Women in the study tended to skew slightly older and more educated than men.

### 3.2. Instrumentation and Variables

The independent variables were the perceived motivations or gratifications sought (*informativeness, socializing/ community building, status-seeking and entertainment*), and the dependent variable was frequency of participation as defined below. These variables were used to construct models for Multiple linear regressions (Model 1: Frequency of Visitation; Model 2: Frequency of Reading; Model 3: Frequency of Posting Content; Model 4: Frequency of Voting; Model 5: Frequency of Commenting).

All constructs were measured with multiple questions, utilizing a standard five-point Likert scale. The survey was adapted from prior instruments employed in uses and gratifications research [14, 22]. Questions related to motivational factors were

randomized within a matrix on the actual survey. Each construct or motivational factor had four dimensions or statements, and each category of statements was designed to measure the four independent variables of informativeness (e.g. “I participate on Reddit.com because it helps me stay up to date on the latest news and events); socializing/ community building (e.g. “I participate on Reddit because it is an effective means to exchange ideas with other people.”); status-seeking (e.g. “I participate on Reddit because it helps me look good.”), and entertainment (e.g. “I participate of Reddit because it helps me pass the time.”).

Users were asked to indicate how frequently they visited Reddit.com: “one to two times per year,” “one to two times per month,” “once a week,” “two to three times per week,” “daily” or “multiple times per day.” This was coded as the variable “Frequency of Visitation.”

An examination of Reddit.com [7] indicated the following types of activities in which users may engage when visiting the site: reading content (including clicking on Subreddits and individual content and comment links); posting content (original or curated content obtained from other websites/sources); commenting (composing and posting a comment on posted content or on another comment by a different user, or commenting on self-posted content); and voting (casting up or down votes on content or comments posted by other users. Note that users may not vote on self-posted content or comments.) Participants were asked to indicate if they engaged in any of these activities (reading, posting content, voting, commenting) and how often they engaged in these activities while on the site, using a five-point scale: “never,” “almost never,” “occasionally/sometimes,” “almost every time,” “every time.”

## 4. Results

The hypotheses predicted that the higher one’s score for the motivational factors (Informativeness, Socializing/ community building, Status-seeking, Entertainment), the more frequent one’s participation on Reddit.com (visiting the site, reading, posting content, voting, commenting). Linear multiple regression analyses were run to examine each of the four proposed hypotheses with the frequency of each indicator of participation as the dependent variable. In order to run the analysis, five conceptual models were created (Model 1: Frequency of Visitation; Model 2: Frequency of Reading; Model 3: Frequency of Posting Content; Model 4: Frequency of Voting; Model 5: Frequency of Commenting). The composite scores for the four motivational factors (Total Informativeness,

Total Socializing, Total Status-seeking, Total Entertainment), along with gender (dummy-coded with males as referent) and age were included as independent variables. There were no significant violations noted for the results of preliminary assumption testing for normality, linearity, homoscedasticity, covariance, and multicollinearity. Cronbach’s alpha values were: Total Socializing (.71), Total Status Seeking (.79), Total Informativeness (.65), and Total Entertainment (.68). However, as each factor had only four components, mean inter-item correlation for Total Informativeness and Total Entertainment yielded values of .313 and .355, respectively, which is well within the recommended range of .2 to .4. Therefore, all scales were deemed reliable.

The results indicate that the multiple regression for Model 1—Frequency of Visitation—was significant,  $R^2 = .045$ ,  $F(6,529) = 4.20$ ,  $p < .001$ . More specifically, the motivational factor of Entertainment positively predicted Frequency of Visitation ( $\beta = .157$ ,  $t = 3.537$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

Model 2—Frequency of Reading—was not significant,  $R^2 = .013$ ,  $F(6,529) = 1.126$ ,  $p = .346$ .

Model 3—Frequency of Posting Content—was significant,  $R^2 = .138$ ,  $F(6,529) = 14.098$ ,  $p < .001$ . In particular, the motivational factor of Socializing/community building positively predicted Frequency of Posting Content ( $\beta = .268$ ,  $t = 4.984$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The results further indicate that age is a positive predictor of posting content ( $\beta = .155$ ,  $t = 3.733$ ,  $p < .001$ ). In addition, gender was dummy coded with males as a referent ( $\beta = .088$ ,  $t = 2.146$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Gender was a positive predictor of posting content.

Model 4—Frequency of Voting—was significant,  $R^2 = .102$ ,  $F(6,529) = 9.993$ ,  $p < .001$ . More specifically, the motivational factors of Socializing ( $\beta = .148$ ,  $t = 2.701$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and Status-seeking ( $\beta = .170$ ,  $t = 3.352$ ,  $p < .01$ ) positively predicted Frequency of Voting. In addition, gender was dummy coded with males as a referent ( $\beta = -.100$ ,  $t = -2.394$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Gender was a negative predictor of Frequency of Voting.

Model 5—Frequency of Commenting—was significant,  $R^2 = .170$ ,  $F(6,529) = 19.305$ ,  $p < .001$ . In particular, the motivational factor of Informativeness negatively predicted Frequency of Commenting ( $\beta = -.120$ ,  $t = -2.713$ ,  $p < .01$ ). The motivational factor of Socializing ( $\beta = .278$ ,  $t = 5.297$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and Status-seeking ( $\beta = .221$ ,  $t = 4.565$ ,  $p < .001$ ) positively predicted Frequency of Commenting. Results indicate that age is a positive predictor of Frequency of Commenting ( $\beta = .114$ ,  $t = 2.813$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

Overall, the results indicate that four of the five proposed conceptual models were found to be statistically significant.

H1 predicted that informativeness or information-seeking would positively predict participation on Reddit.com. In other words, users are motivated to participate because they are seeking information, and users will visit more frequently or perform select activities more frequently while on the site to obtain information they find useful. Based on the results from the four significant models, Informativeness did not positively predict participation on Reddit through frequency of visitation, reading, posting content or voting. However, additional findings indicate that informativeness negatively predicted frequency of commenting. Overall, H1 was not supported.

H2 predicted that socializing and community building would positively predict participation on Reddit.com, meaning users visit the site more frequently or perform select activities more frequently while on the site in order to connect with other users, and build community. According to the results, socializing/ community building positively predicted Frequency of Posting Content (Model 3), Frequency of Voting on content or comments by other users (inclusive of up or down votes) (Model 4), and Frequency of Commenting on content or responding to comments posted by other users (Model 5). In regard to models 3, 4, and 5, H2 was supported.

H3 predicted that status-seeking would positively predict participation on Reddit.com. This means that users visit the site more frequently and/or perform select activities more frequently while on the site in order to gain status. According to the results, status-seeking positively predicted Frequency of Voting (Model 4) and Frequency of Commenting (Model 5). Regarding models 4 and 5, H3 was supported.

H4 predicted that entertainment would positively predict participation on Reddit.com. In other words, users visit the site more frequently and/or perform select activities more frequently while visiting the site to entertain themselves. Based on the results from the four significant models, entertainment positively predicted Frequency of Visitation (Model 1). Regarding model 1, H4 was supported.

#### 4.1 Additional Findings

Additional findings presented here are intended to inform interpretation of hypotheses and inform future studies. Results indicate that age was a positive predictor of Frequency of Posting Content and Frequency of Commenting. In addition, gender was a positive predictor of Frequency of Posting Content. Males were more likely to post original or curated

content. Gender was a negative predictor of Frequency of Voting. Males were less likely to vote on content or comments.

## 5. Discussion

The purpose of paper is to examine what motivational factors influence frequency of participation on the social news website Reddit.com.

Taking a uses and gratifications perspective, this study examined the motivational factors influencing user participation on Reddit.com. Per expectations, socializing/ community building was a relevant factor, as was status-seeking and entertainment. Contrary to expectations, informativeness or information seeking was a negative predictor of participation, specifically for frequency of commenting.

From a theoretical standpoint, the study reinforces the existing literature which postulates that the uses and gratification approach, which stems from studies of traditional mass media consumption, is a valid means by which to examine the motivations and gratifications sought and obtained by users of new media, specifically online social media platforms and virtual communities. However, the examination of new needs and motivations is also needed in order to expand the approach.

### 5.1 Motivational Factors

Socializing/community building was the most prominent of the motivational factors. Three of the four statistically significant models tested using different indicators of participation showed that socializing/community building made a unique contribution to explaining the dependent variables tested. In two of the four models, socializing/community building made the strongest unique contribution to explaining the dependent variables of Frequency of Posting Content ( $\beta = .268$ ) and Frequency of Commenting on content or comments posted by other users ( $\beta = .278$ ). It also made a strong unique contribution to explaining how frequently users voted on content or comments made by other users (inclusive of up or down votes,  $\beta = .148$ ), just slightly less than status-seeking ( $\beta = .170$ ).

Socializing/community building as a factor in posting content is consistent with the literature, explained by the concept of anticipatory socialization [25]. Anticipatory socialization means that users obtain social gratifications from sharing original or curated content with other users. Aggregators, like Reddit, are virtual communities where sharing content facilitates social connections [27]. This sharing of information through posting content is one way of

building new social connections and maintaining current connections. That is to say, posting content is the method by which users share their beliefs and viewpoints in the hopes of finding others who share those beliefs and viewpoints, and/or they are seeking to reinforce shared belief systems and viewpoints with users with whom they have previously connected.

Socializing/ community building, as a salient factor for posting comments on content or responding to comments by others, is also consistent with the literature, as users forge new social connections by discussing posted content or interact through responding to comments posted by other users. They also reinforce existing social connections through posting comments that agree or disagree with comments by other users. Users also help to enforce community standards through commenting (calling out trolls or those who are reposting content from another user and claiming it as original); thereby, strengthening the community of individual Subreddits and Reddit as a meta-community. Self-policing when it comes to agreed-upon behaviors is a crucial part of building and maintaining communities, both in person and online.

Socializing/community building as a relevant factor in voting behaviors may also be explained by the fact that users upvote content they think is worthy (by whatever individual or internalized community standards may apply); thereby, helping other users in the community to see a worthy post and creating the opportunity to also share their views on the post with others. Upvoting and downvoting, though accounted for by status-seeking as well (see below), are social actions for the betterment of the Subreddit on which the content is posted, and therefore, benefit the community as a whole. This harkens back to the altruistic motivations that can be folded in with community building and socializing [20, 28]. Upvoted content will be seen by more users who may then benefit from the information contained therein. Downvoted or unworthy content is pushed so far down as to be eliminated; thereby, improving the overall quality (as deemed by the users as a collective) of the community.

Status-seeking was the second most salient of the motivational factors examined. Status-seeking made a significant unique contribution to explaining Frequency of Voting ( $\beta = .170$ ). It also made the second strongest unique contribution to explaining the Frequency of Commenting on content or posts by other users ( $\beta = .221$ ). Status-seeking as a relevant factor related to voting is consistent with the literature. Members of Facebook user groups look to raise status in their peer group through participation [22]. Since users are seeking status through participation, a system

to reward participation aids those who are motivated to pursue status [14]. Reddit's built-in karma points system does just that. Through voting on comments or content, users help other users gain status points, supporting established community practices that they themselves may benefit from when other users upvote their content or comments. Therefore, voting and status seeking are linked even though a user may not upvote their own content or comments. Voting behavior supports the karma points system so that the more helpful members of the group gain the most karma. The higher a user's number of karma points, whether link karma or comment karma, the more standing the user has in the community. Someone with higher karma points is considered a trusted and respected member of the community who makes a valuable contribution to the community as a whole. Status-seeking, as a relevant factor related to commenting, is also consistent with the literature. Studies have found that users will attempt to gain status among other users in their chosen group through commenting and engaging in discussion with other users to establish credibility and boost self-esteem (14, 21; 26].

Entertainment was the third most relevant of the motivational factors examined. One model found that entertainment made a unique contribution to explaining the dependent variable of Frequency of Visitation ( $\beta = .157$ ). This finding is consistent with the literature. Studies on other social media and content sharing sites have found that seeking and obtaining entertainment were a strong motivating factor for participants [21, 22, 23, 29, 31]. However, the Lee, Ma & Goh [14] did not find that entertainment was a motivating factor for news sharing specifically. News sharing equates with posting content in the context of Reddit.com. It should be noted that although entertainment was a relevant factor for Frequency of Visitation, it was not for posting content specifically, which is in line with the Lee, Ma and Goh study findings.

Informativeness or information seeking made a unique contribution to explaining the dependent variable of Frequency of Commenting. Information seeking was a negative predictor of how often users commented on content or comments by other users. In other words, users who were seeking useful information are less likely to comment on content posted by other users or themselves. Information seeking as a negative predictor of commenting has some logic to it, in that looking for information is not compatible with sharing your views and opinions. However, our finding that information seeking is a negative predictor for frequency of participation is unexpected and contrary to the current literature.

Studies on similar social media sites, such as Twitter, YouTube and Wikipedia, all found that seeking and obtaining useful information was a strong motivational factor and among the most important gratifications sought and obtained [20, 21, 23]. There are several conclusions one can draw from the findings that information seeking is not positively associated with participation on Reddit, including how users view information on the site as they engage, and possible limitations of the study.

Reddit users are seeking social interactions and community-building and utilizing the affordances of the site to facilitate meeting those needs. This harkens back to Rheingold's original concept of the virtual community as a place for building relationships [17]. What we see from this study is that regardless of the intended purpose of a site or platform, the human need for social interaction may indeed take precedence.

For Redditors who perceive socializing and building community as the strongest motivation for participation, the informational aspect may simply be one of the many tools they use to socialize. Regular Reddit users may visit the site not to seek out useful information, but rather, visit the site as a destination to interact with others and read/see whatever they happen to come across. The information they find there is fodder for the interactions that occur on the site.

Informativeness or seeking and obtaining useful information could be simply a means to an end—a way to spark new social relationships or reinforce existing ones. Users could be focusing on the social and status-seeking aspects rather than the content in and of itself. For example, take a video of an octopus that was given a camera and turned that camera on the scientist who gave it the camera and filmed him instead. One could argue that the content of the video is not as important to the users viewing the content as upvoting it, commenting on how cool it is, or making funny jokes to caption the video. Upvoting the video and commenting on it can show other users how clever and insightful a user is, while that user may also upvote the funny or insightful comment from another user. Hopefully, a posted comment will be upvoted so that the user can gain karma points in the process. In other words, the interaction takes precedence over the content. The content may be the catalyst but is not ultimately the focus. Engaging with other users, increasing the overall quality of the site through upvoting and giving and gaining karma points surpasses the desire to seek information for a specific purpose for the preponderance of users.

One could also posit that users or visitors, for whom seeking information is a stronger motivational factor, are not the same users who would also complete a survey posted on the site. If they are mostly there to

find information, they may not be looking to offer up information about themselves or their reasons for visiting the site. They read, obtain the information they need, and move on. For example, someone visits the front page to see what is the current most upvoted story, reads it, and moves on, perhaps checking back later for updates. Since Reddit is completely public, anyone may seek and obtain information on the site without being a registered user and without interacting with anyone or performing other activities while visiting the site.

Users who only read content and do not participate in other activities on the site were not surveyed in a manner that could yield useful data, as all users marked "read content" as an activity while visiting Reddit. The model for this dependent variable did not yield statistically significant results.

The instrument used for this study was adapted from prior studies [14, 22] and sought to gauge motivational factors or gratifications based on the traditional clusters of needs as outlined by Rubin [13]. Studies have put forth that these needs clusters may need to be modified, refined and/or built upon, as the way users interact with these new technologies may in fact be creating new needs or teasing out needs previously undetected in the context of the traditional clusters [10, 11]. These researchers also argue that the basic needs clusters themselves are overly broad in the context of the new agency afforded users and the many ways individuals may engage with the ever-evolving tools and technologies available to them [10, 11]. The findings of this study further support the call for closer examination and refinement in order to better gauge user needs in the context of the plethora of affordances offered up by Reddit and other sites that facilitate user interaction. For example, information seeking—a need that previous studies found to be one of the most important motivational factors or gratifications sought—was a negative predictor for the participation indicator of posting comments, which supports recent media uses and gratifications research indicating that the traditional needs clusters are no longer sufficient.

Researchers focusing on Wikipedians [10] have proposed new categories of needs and motivations based on the affordances of the site. As previously mentioned, Reddit shares many similarities with Wikipedia in the massive complex structure of the site which is devoted to sharing content. Thus, these needs and motivations—professional versus nonprofessional participation, constructive, confrontational and vandalistic behavior, and lurking or silent behavior—could be applied to the Reddit community.

Further, Massanari's detailed examination of the structure of Reddit [8], gives insight into the current structure of the site. Her analysis looks at everything



from the mob mentality (why does the community turn on its own for no apparent reason?); to the concept of the IMA AMA (I am a... ask me anything) phenomenon where people, whose identities are verified (often celebrities), answer questions in real time from Reddit users, who are known by usernames within the community only. Masanari also looks at the development and use of themed macros and memes across the site ("Scumbag Steve," "Good Girl Gina") and the prevalence of pornography, racism and misogyny. Her analysis offers opportunities to examine new needs and motivations that result from the unique affordances of Reddit.

Regarding the demographics of Reddit users, age was only found as a relevant factor for posting and commenting. Though age is relevant for these two factors, it could also be viewed as a limitation given the fairly consistent age of Reddit users overall. It's possible that younger or older users have different motivational factors, or combinations of factors that were subsumed by the fact that the overwhelming majority of survey respondents fall in a narrow age range (18-29). However, the demographics of Reddit [4] are comparable to those of the study population; thus, findings are generalizable to the general Reddit user population.

## 5.2 Recommendations

Research applying the uses and gratifications approach to a news aggregator website such as Reddit.com provides data for scholars studying new media and the ways traditional media theories can be applied in these new contexts. Designers and practitioners looking to create news aggregators, incorporate news aggregator functionalities into new or existing platforms, or designers of current aggregators looking to improve the user experience, may use these results. Implementing or improving status attainment systems (for those users who are status-seeking), facilitating enriched interaction experiences and means to connect with other users, and streamlining sharing across the platform or across many platforms simultaneously are just a few examples of ways the results of this study may guide designers looking to better serve users who participate to socialize and build community (the most relevant motivational factor according to this study's results). Focusing on ways to enable new users to quickly and seamlessly join the community and clearly outlining community standards to encourage positive interactions are also some features designers can implement based on the findings of this study.

Future research may expand upon this approach to look at other news aggregator sites. In addition, more

detailed analyses of Redditor motivations should be conducted to examine behaviors such as the upvoting and downvoting as related to gratifications. One could build upon uses and gratifications by a more nuanced examination of how and why people comment on specific content and how users may maintain multiple identities that exhibit different voting, posting and commenting behaviors.

A more detailed analysis of the anonymous nature of Reddit as a factor influencing behavior could be compared to other sites where users' real identities are required to participate (such as Facebook.). A further examination of the influence of age as a positive predictor of posting content and commenting, and gender as a positive predictor of posting content and a negative predictor of voting, could yield new insights into the roles of gender and age in the context of social media interactions, not only for Redditors, but for users on other social media platforms. Further exploration of participation behaviors for users from different cultures, countries and ethnicities may yield new insight into designing sites targeted at specific user groups.

A new instrument aimed specifically at those who only read content could yield more revealing results about those who do not engage in other activities while on the site. The challenge, however, would be in how to garner user participation from users who do nothing other than read content.

An instrument based on the recommendations of Sundar and Limperos [11] could delve deeper into the broader categories of needs assessed in this study, or build on the findings and conclusions presented here by examining new needs and motivational factors based on the modalities and tools available on Reddit as well as those available on other social media and news aggregator platforms. Future studies should also apply the needs and motivations presented by Wikipedian researchers—professional versus nonprofessional participation, constructive, confrontational and vandalistic behavior, and lurking or silent behavior [10]—to the Reddit community. In addition, Massanari's [8] examination of Reddit's structure offers rich opportunities for future motivations and gratifications research as new needs and motivations appear as a result of Reddit's unique affordances.

The findings of this study indicate that even on a site specifically designed to share news, informativeness was surpassed by the desire to connect with others. The news and other types of content are just the means by which many Redditors may seek out, grow and maintain relationships with other Redditors. How virtual communities such as Reddit grow and evolve, what draws people to them

and keeps them coming back offers insight into the very nature of human communication endeavors.

## 6. References

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